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# Please, Pass the Health

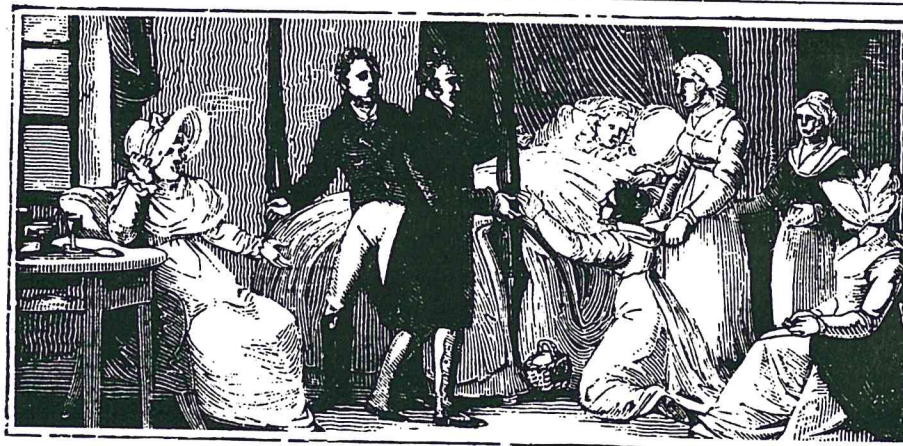
by Richard J. Margolis

## Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health

by Ivan Illich. 304 pp. Pantheon,  
\$8.95

In his seminal 1910 report on medical schools—a report that changed the face of medicine in this country by insisting on “professional standards” for doctors—Abraham Flexner likened a sick person to “a machine that has broken down” and a doctor to a sophisticated mechanic. This mechanical model of health care, simpleminded as it may seem to some, has proved surprisingly durable over the decades; for all practical purposes it remains the philosophical basis of medicine as it is currently practiced. Note the nation's ever-expanding arsenal of medical contrivances, from pacemakers to laser guns, as well as our seemingly bottomless pharmacopeia: doctors are up to their eyeballs in devices designed to repair the patient without the patient's help; indeed, as often as not, without his assent.

Ivan Illich does not cite Flexner, but it is apparently in hopes of making us perceive, and thus alter, our culture's dreary, Flexnerian view of man that he offers us *Medical Nemesis*. In ancient Greece, Illich reminds us, Nemesis represented a species of divine vengeance visited upon mortals who forgot their human limitations and



tried to imitate the gods. Their sin was called *hubris*, a kind of cosmic *chutzpah*. In Illich's rather complex scheme of things, modern man's *hubris* is in thinking that science can somehow cure all disease and prevent all pain, that it can serve more or less as a perpetual health machine. What we get for entertaining this delusion is “medical nemesis,” a totally out-of-whack health-care system. In Illich's moral universe, the punishment always fits the crime.

For the better part of two decades Illich has been urging nations large and small to shun such assorted blessings of our industrial age as technology worship, human engineering, and bureaucratic planning—in short, all those forms of “progress” so dear to the managerial heart. On his calculator these add up to a kind of tyranny. Whether benevolent or malign, the modern, all-purpose, planned society ultimately invades the soul and saps the will; we are thereby rendered less human.

Though a master of high and heady scholarship (this slim volume contains 622 footnotes), Illich eschews the merely academic. His message is political. Like the late Hannah Arendt, Illich believes that “bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act. . .”—and it may be for this reason that he writes with such a fierce impatience, feeling that it is rather late in the day for gradualism. Thus, in *Deschooling Society* (1971), Illich in effect called for the abolition of contemporary public-school systems—the Soviets' as well as our own and others in the West—on the grounds that as instruments of the ruling classes schools discourage real learning and instead “teach man to keep his engineered place.”

Half prophet and half polemicist, Illich is drawn toward generalizations—the more sweeping the better. His opening shot in *Medical Nemesis* strikes the book's dominant note and provides as good an example as any